NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER DONATE NOW!
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Lorettos celebrate two centuries of touching lives

Arthur Jones | May. 18, 2012

Loretto Srs. Dorothy Scheopner and Mary Ellen McElroy visit the Loretto Heritage Center in Nerinx, Ky., during its official dedication April 24. (Donna Mattingly, SL)

Theirs was a meeting of the minds, and of faith. Like a Christ-impelled pebble dropped into the sea of humanity, their meeting created waves of movement.

She was Mary Rhodes, a young Maryland woman come to Kentucky to visit her brother, Bennett.

He was Fr. Charles Nerinckx, a transplanted Belgian priest who?d fled the European anti-Catholicism stoked by the French Revolution.

The Rhodes family knew all about anti-Catholicism. Bennett Rhodes headed one of dozens of Catholic families from St. Mary?s County, Md., who fled to Kentucky in the final quarter of the 18th century to escape the state?s punitive ?anti-popery? bigotry. Mary had come to visit. She remained to teach his children their three Rs, and give them religious instruction. Two others joined her.

Beginning in 1812, a tiny society of three women religious grew to dozens, then hundreds who eddied out across America, following the expanding frontier. They touched the lives first of hundreds, then thousands of young American people -- but primarily young women -- through education. They broke through national bounds to touch lives in more than 30 countries.

Rhodes held the vision; Nerinckx provided approval. The three women made it happen.

NERINX, KY. -- This region was once the American frontier. An hour or so south of Louisville, this rolling and sometimes wooded Kentucky countryside experienced Indian raids, failed harvests, privation -- and hard work.

The destination is south of Bardstown, along a winding road as undulating as a caterpillar?s back, to a steep driveway with a handsome brick gateway. At the driveway?s crest, on the right, is a cabin. Logs from Nerinckx?s original home are interlaced through it. Straight ahead: the commanding, beckoning, welcoming motherhouse of the Sisters of Loretto.

The original ?motherhouse,? so to speak, was a log cabin not unlike the one alongside the driveway. Mary Rhodes was the original ?mother,? barely out of her 20s.

When Rhodes started teaching Bennett?s children, other parents asked if their children could be similarly schooled. A second young woman, Christina Stuart, volunteered to help. For a while Bennett?s home, frequently the community?s gathering place, had children spilling out of the door.

The place was so crowded that the two women and Nerinckx rehabbed a tumbledown cabin, re-mudding the logs and thatching the roof. That became the school. Ann Havern joined them. The three, with Nerinckx and volunteers, rehabbed a second log cabin as accommodation for the young women. That?s because Rhodes had approached Nerinckx with a daring thought: They wanted to form a religious community, the Friends of Mary at the Foot of the Cross.

Nerinckx?s enthusiasm matched theirs. He wrote their one-page rule. It was April 25, 1812.

The priest offered to bring in nuns from France to teach them how to be women religious. The three declined, and said they preferred to work with him. They pronounced their vows in 1813.

He went to Rome, several times, until he finally received formal approval for their community -- granted with the proviso they change their name. They became the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross.

This was America?s second Catholic women?s congregation. Mother (now Saint) Elizabeth Seton had created the Sisters of Charity (now the Daughters of Charity) three years earlier in Maryland. Eight months after the Lorettos, a second Kentucky congregation would blossom in this fertile frontier soil: the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth.

By the time Nerinckx died in 1824, the Lorettos had their first school outside Kentucky, in Missouri. Each decade brought further frontier expansion, and the Lorettos were there: Arkansas, Kansas, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, California. They opened schools. And they closed schools, or handed them to others -- when the parents would not cooperate or support the work, or when demanding pastors ordered them to take on sacristy work in addition to teaching. The Lorettos always refused.

They had their work: educating.

The follow-the-frontier Lorettos paused in 1893 long enough for Loretto schools to win gold medals and blue ribbons at the Chicago Columbian Exhibition?s education exhibit. In 1912, the farsighted Mother Praxedes Carty took the bold step of sending four women religious to The Catholic University of America for baccalaureate degrees -- the order was then opening normal (teacher-training) schools, women?s academies and women?s colleges. There was more pioneering: In 1923, they went to China. Over the next six decades there?d be a Loretto presence, perhaps a dozen nuns, perhaps one or two working cooperatively with others, in locales as different as Peru and Taiwan, Uganda and Vietnam, Chuuk (Oceania) and Canada.

After the 1960s, the work was not always the same. ?The Latin American experience really changed us as a community,? said Sisters of Loretto president Sr. Cathy Mueller. ?We started hearing firsthand, experiencing firsthand, what was really going on in other countries where we were doing pastoral work and teaching. We became aware of systemic violence as well as systemic poverty -- along with the role of the United States.?

?It changed our vision of who we are and what we do,? she said. ?We came to understand you can?t do things alone. Networking, making connections with others -- that became the focus.?

Mueller, Loretto president since 2007, knows networking. In Denver, she founded Woman Space/Woman Time and EarthLinks, one to support women on their spiritual journey, the other to provide experiential education for people living on the margins of society.

Those margins, she explained, even took Loretto back to networking their origins: schools. ?One of our sisters in St. Louis saw poor girls of middle-school age who were lost before they went to high school. She worked with other St. Louis-area religious communities and they founded the Marian Middle School.?

For much of the century post-1850s, the number of sisters ranged in the several hundreds, rising to 600 by 1912. Post-World War II, the now-familiar and widespread ?spike? experienced by U.S. religious orders -- female and male -- occurred. In those decades Loretto numbers climbed even higher.

Fifty years later there are 215 vowed sisters, and 215 co-members.

On April 25, hundreds of those members and co-members gathered in their Nerinx motherhouse church to open their third century, and to plan for it, to celebrate it.

Yet another frontier.

Just before his death, in his final letter to the 12-year-old ?Society? of the Sisters of Loretto, Nerinckx wrote: ?There is not a spark of doubt in my mind but you will undergo great changes from your present state, which the far greatest number of you looks upon as happy; you must only pray that what is to come may be for the better.?

[Arthur Jones is NCR book review editor. His email address is ajones@ncronline.org.]

Festivities planned nationwide

From ancient bells rung and celebratory Masses held, to 15,000 trees planted in the motherhouse grounds in Nerinx, Ky., events and festivities have marked the anniversary year -- and still do, in St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., and in more than two-dozen other states and in 11 foreign countries where members are active.

Examples include a June 23 jubilee liturgy in Denver, a city also the venue for the Aug. 11 conversation, ?Working for Justice, Acting for Peace: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.? El Paso Lorettos in Texas have hosted a history exhibit, and plan a September homecoming reception and border Mass. Santa Fe, N.M., Lorettos and friends have a Sept. 26 ?Keep the Flame Burning? prayer service.

In Nerinx -- where the new Heritage Center opened April 25, there?ll be an Oct. 19-20 ?Earth Mama? program

with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, who mark their 200 years Dec. 1.

-- *Arthur Jones*

Stories in this series

- Lorettos celebrate two centuries of touching lives [2], by Arthur Jones
- Speakers explore what order has to offer today [3], by Arthur Jones

[4]

[4]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [4]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/07/2015 - 00:03*): http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/lorettos-celebrate-two-centuries-touching-lives

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/30421
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/30422
[4] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end